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The Jefferson Davis Anniversary Celebration

To The Confederate Veterans Association

of Waverly, Alabama, June 3, 1908

By WILLIAM HOLCOMBE THOMAS.

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Ladies and Gentlemen :

More than twenty years ago I went out from the dear old red hills of East Alabama, to the serious battle of life. In what small degree I have succeeded I lay it to the lessons of patience, industry, kindness and honesty of purpose you tried to teach me in my early years. When your invitation came, I could only regret that it found me so engaged with the Equity docket of the City Court of Montgomery that I could do no more than write my poor words expressive of the sentiment of the occasion.

I trust that the United Daughters of the Confederacy will hand on to the childhood of the country, the nobility of character of the old South and its highest example of patriotism and purity of womanhood. I trust that the camps of Confederate veterans and camps of Sons of Confederate veterans will ever inspire that patriotism to highest effort in doing the work of the day and will never do aught to drag down the ideals of Southern manhood and womanhood to the commercialized basis that I fear is too much taking hold in some sections of this Union.

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My countrymen, the world has always done honor to the hero. Your patriotic orders have brought together this splendid citizenship to do honor to our hero. Where the "Surging billows dash the white sands at Beauvoir," there lived an aged and careworn man to whom the impartial historian will accord a place with the great and wise of earth. For many years he trod alone the "paths of our defeat," his motives misunderstood by those who did not lend an understanding ear; patiently bearing the taunts and jeers heaped upon us by those who would clothe our defeat in dishonor. Yet his pure and spotless character was vindicated in the purity of his long life; in his patience, forbearance and charity for the lack of charity in others; in the ease, the grace, and native dignity with which he "bowed his neck to receive and wear the yoke of disfranchisement placed thereon by the hands of the uncharitable." And when, a few years before his death, this aged chieftain made a pilgrimage through the South to his ancient capital, all along the route at every wayside and station came flocking crowds to do him the honor of their presence. The young, the old, the rich and poor, the pauper and peasant were there. Silvered age and blooming youth, budding manhood and womanhood, all joined in a surging crowd, striving to get one fleeting glance, or catch a single word falling from the lips of the grand old man. The aged, the crippled, the blind and empty sleeved veterans came also, and fired by the encouraging presence of their chieftain, greeted him with voices rising heavenward in such a Confederate yell as was heard on a hundred battlefields. And we will ever transmit with tender and loving care to posterity the name of him whose anniversary we celebrate today—and the name of Jefferson Davis is a patrimony to preserve.

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WHAT OF THE CONFEDERATE SOLDIER OF HISTORY.

The heroic figure of the Confederate soldier, as presented to the world by the dispassionate historian, can but gain the admiration of his enemies. There may be those who differed from him politically, those who from self-interest or prejudice would deny him the laurel he hath so dearly won because thinking for himself, he opposed encroachment upon the constitutional guarantee of Local Self Government. "Yet even those doubting his cause can never doubt him." To well do they remember how, like a rushing torrent, he swept before him their mighty army from off the plains of Manassas, and spread consternation throughout their capital. Too well do they remember with what results they met at Winchester, Cross Keys, and Port Republic; and how Stonewall Jackson fell upon and took 11,000 prisoners at Harper's Ferry, crossed the Potomac into Maryland. Nor will they soon forget the few who drove back the many of the foe at Fredericksburg and at Sharpsburg, who won glorious victories at Kernstown and Monocacy, "grappled with death in the Wilderness," and defeated "the finest army on the planet" at Chancellorsville. Nay, more, with admiration do they remember, as with the impetus of a mighty hurricane, the boys in Gray a second time defeated and whirled into a disorderly retreat their well equipped and well drilled armies, adding new glories to the chaplet of laurel stripped from the historic fields of Manassas. Nor do they forget the many significant death-pauses when the muster roll was called after their "careless assaults at Spottsylvania," or success in Pennsylvania, at Cold Harbor or New Market, along the rippling Rapidan, or on Mayre's Stony Heights, at Pittsburgh, or after the awful slaughter at Petersburg, many a brave soldier in Blue answered not, his going to pitch

his tent “on Fame’s eternal camping ground,” was a sad but immortal monument of glory of the valor of the Southern soldier.

FOUR YEARS AGAINST FEARFUL ODDS.

Four awful years did he fight against fearful odds, not only defending his home, but invaded the enemy’s territory. For four years, almost without a navy, did her so-called “pirate boats” walk the blue waves as a thing of life, wrapping many a graceful merchantman fresh from the pine and spruce forests of the North in fiery winding sheets, sending a paralytic stroke to the heart of Northern commerce. The story of his bravery, on five hundred stormy fields, will ever be told by the eloquence of every graveyard from Oak Hill to the Rio Grande. And every brook and stream or rolling hill or lofty mountain peak, shall each to posterity transmit the name of some soldier boy nourished there, who, when his country called, angled no more the silvered trout, or chased the timid hare, nor leaped again in childish sport from rock to clift, but went forth, as he understood, to protect a nation’s honor by preventing the infringement of solemn agreements it had sworn to hold inviolate; to defend the Constitution, and to strike the serpent of centralization that he feared would draw its coils more tightly around the nation, crushing individual industry and political rights.

GLORIOUS MEMORIES.

There is that within each manly breast causing him to write on memory’s tablets in loving characters, the deeds of noble defenses for the principles and customs of his home. The man lacking this is not the man he should be. The Irishman would be less Irish were his

Celtic lay to give place to the English melody, nor will the child of the Alps cease loving to hear the dreadful roar as "from peak to peak leaps the live thunder." But it is natural. The true-hearted Southerner will not cease to hear the sublime but truly awful roll of Fort Donelson's bombardment, or soon forget the hard-fought but glorious battle of Bull Run, where many a true and gallant boy from the land of sunshine and of snow, lay down to sleep together. What a fratricidal scene! Born of the same parents; children of the same household; alike indomitable; and died by each other's hand. Oh, brothers at the North! join with us today in "gracing their memory with an elegy of words and tears."

Shall memory soon be overcome in Oblivion's slow and silent stream, losing in sweet forgetfulness the sublime lessons of duty, equally exemplified in the trenches at Vicksburg, at Corinth, where the Rappahannock's crimson waters roll, or on the twin hills of Gettysburg. Shall the Southern heart cease to beat in harmonious accord with the spirit that urged on their hardy few "through the mazes of superior generalship" in the Virginia campaigns, or signalling the bravery of fame's eternal Chickamauga? Will that mother ever forget the darling blue-eyed boy, with brow so fair with maiden gentleness, who at martial duty's call was transformed into a type of manly beauty and went forth a peace-offering for his country? Will not the fair young wife, now grown gray with the sorrows of widowhood and the cares of orphanage, make a yearly pilgrimage to her shrine, laden with the trophies of springtime, to place tokens of remembrance on the soldier's grave? Shall we ever cease reading with effect the inscriptions on the ten thousand little doors of eternity, opening on every hillside and dale, from the mighty Mississippi to the valley of the Shenandoah, or shut our ears to the historic

lessons taught by those whose “tongues are now stringless instruments,” and who will

A golden drift thro’ all the song.”

“Speak to the ages with

SHILOH CHURCH.

There are many never-to-be-forgotten scenes in the brilliant but bloody panorama of our historic Rembrandt. I would have you look as I draw the curtain. Behold a little log house on an elevated plateau, embowered by tall oaks and shut in by thick brush-wood—without doors or windows—as open as the hearts of the good Christians who come yearly to worship in this rustic sanctuary. This is Shiloh Church. It is the Sabbath day, fresh with the breath of springtime—“the sweet rich voice of the morning songster filled the air with melody”—all is lovely and Godlike. But hark! The onslaught is terrible, avalanche-like two contending armies rush to battle, the roar of cannon, the peal of musketry, the wounded charger, rushing madly without the master’s guiding hand, the groan of the dying, the thick sulphurous smoke, the din and clangor of war has hushed the little songster and changed the Sabbath’s quiet into a revelry of Pandemonium. Fire and smoke, storm of rage, death and the dying, confusion worse confounded before on earth was never. Albert Sydney Johnston falls, Beauregard presses on more vehemently against a like vehement foe, till nature drew the veil of night over her fair countenance, that the cooling dews of Heaven may quench the torrent fires of men’s minds inflamed, or the gentle zephyrs before the morning’s dawn may tense and attune the heart-strings of humanity. But night only gave preparation for a more deadly warfare, which raged continually and more fiercely throughout this sec-

ond day, until nature again closing her eyes on the agonizing scene, shed copious tears which fell like a soothing portion to the dying soldier. And remembering the departed heroes of the battle of Shiloh, what wonder that we hold them in hallowed memory.

DESTINY DECREES DEFEAT.

But the God of Battle, seemed to have ordained otherwise than that the Sons of the Confederacy be crowned with success. And if his soul-stirring shouts of victory were echoed along the slopes of the Cumberland mountains, or up the sides of the joyous Kennesaw, yet the ominous dirge of slowly retreating armies was heard after the conflict at Shiloh, at Nashville and Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Defeat was the test-tube in which the nobility of character was tried. As the smelting furnace tests the purity of metals, so was the Confederate soldier sorely tried by a great disparity of numbers, and a greater desparity in arms and munitions of war; by grim, gaunt and ghastly hunger, that dimmed the lustre of the eye and paled the rosy cheek of health, by the snows powdering their uncovered heads, and the raging winds chilling and fevering their ill-clad bodies. Away from home and prayerful mother; away from loving wife and children needful of paternal care and protection; away as a volunteer fighting for home and country, and not as a hierling, hazarding his life for the paltry wages. "His many long forced marches in cold and heat and storm, his bravery in the danger of battle, his fortitude in bearing his aches and pains and agony of wounds, his hopefulness in disaster and defeat, his fidelity to principle and trust in God," has written his name in the archives of the reunited nation as a beloved son in whom she is well pleased. Now the brother from the North,

understanding the principles and motives that instigated the South to action, is glad to grasp her sons by the hand "as worthy the name of an American and a brother."

GEN. ROBERT E. LEE.

Many pen-portraits may be drawn that would be appreciated by a Southern heart. I could speak of a life, in the language of Montesque, as a "hymn in praise of humanity." I could point to his superior military genius, to the last sad scene at Appomattox, where he bore himself with a fearless mien, and a dignity becoming the surrender of the hopes of his people; could point to the sweet and hearty sympathy as he bade his army "an affectionate farewell"; at this faithful devotion to the duties of peace, and in this you would see a life that belongs not alone to the South, for the life of Robert E. Lee belongs to America, in the same sense that Nelson or Wellington are of England.

WHY THE SOUTH WITHDREW FROM THE UNION.

What, then, of the cause for which we fought? There were different views from different standpoints. Nathaniel Hawthorne says: "The Southern man will say we fight for State's rights, liberty and independence. The middle western man will vow that he fights for the Union; while the Northern and Eastern man will swear that from the beginning his only idea was the annihilation of slavery." We, of course, know the South withdrew from the Union not with a spirit of rebellion, but because she believed her wishes had been disregarded, her constitutional guarantees had been trampled under the heel of majorities, because it was thought that sectional legislation by those having no similar interest with the people of the South, was fast driving wealth

from her soft and genial clime, her generous and fruitful soil, to the regions north of the Potomac. This it was that drove us from the house of our fathers, and going, we carried the love of law and order, wisdom, justice and moderation—the heritage of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson.

DUTY OF TODAY.

My countrymen, the hallowed voices of Davis and Lee and the graves of the Southern sons killed in our civil war speak to you each day of duty. For we are back in the Union again, not to forget traditions, not to forget our noble ideals, but to do our duties in home and church and State. This mission is filled with great responsibility to the American nation.

If there is a delusion of wealth in the United States that is trying the manhood of a nation we still know that honor is above price; if with vast property rights come power and responsibility we know that it must not ignore character and individual effort. If the corporation has vested rights that are conflicting with individual effort we know that when properly regulated it is a valuable aid to the efforts of the individual. With this complex relation we recognize that the corporation's rights must be just as secure as the individual's and that individual rights must ever be kept as secure as the corporation's; that the domain of corporate activity shall be business and that the rights of the individual in political life is supreme.

The manhood of the South sees grave dangers in the government giving exact data to the manipulators of prices of cotton and other raw materials in the hands of the producer and in failing to protect the producers against manipulated prices and failing to give them back the information of the stored raw material or finished

product in the hands of the merchant, factor or factory.

The South sees a menace in the frequent contests of labor and capital, but will give her aid to right adjustments that must be made without interruption and sufferings.

If there is a menace of privilege taking hold in the nation, the result of selfish protection laws putting commerce above manhood, the South, we believe, has tried to be true to her ideals of manhood and the responsibility of the individual.

If the home is being attacked in America, as I tried on yesterday to show in my address to the Birmingham College, it will be found in the tendencies of the people to drift from the farm to cities, from separate dwellings to boarding houses and tenements, in the 72,000 divorces and 875,000 annual marriages; in the extravagant tastes and luxurious manners of the people, and their ready adoption of fads and slavish adherence to style; in the increasing summer and winter resorts idea; making home transitory; in the restless running here and there by easy transportations; in the expenditure for tobacco and strong drink of \$1,993,000,000 and only \$257,000,000 for home and foreign church work; in a jewelry, millinery, confectionary and chewing-gum bill of \$969,000,000 and the sum of \$338,216,000 for education; in the invasion of the home by modern industry; the diminishing birth rates, and the story that is told in the marriage each year of only three per cent of the unmarried population fifteen years of age and over; in a rate of divorce increase in each five year period of about thirty per cent, in the last decade is more than three times the increase of population; this condition is largely the result of an unhealthy commercialism that we believe has taken slighter root with us than with other sections of the nation. The ideal American home will be found not far from the firesides, and in the true and contented wives,

the honest and ambitious sons and the virtuous and industrious daughters of the middle classes of the South.

If these are base political methods, vexing the nation, we know that the South is putting into such questions her best thought and honesty of purpose to keep the sources of politics pure, to have a right administration of the affairs of State, and to keep her municipal life from the scandals that come daily from municipal life in other sections.

I take pleasure in saying here that we all recognize that we are a part of the Union, even though we have little part in the administrations of the affairs of the nation. In the future we intend to have a larger share in trying to make things go right in America, and are begining at home, by trying to settle our own peculiar problems right. We will demand our recognition as individuals of honest purpose, and our recognition as a section whose millions of produce gives this nation its balance of trade against the world.

Of late, our customs and sentiments are being considered and our rights more nearly recognized. The Presidents of the United States are showing considerations and the senators and members of congress from other sections are less denunciatory. A little while ago a peace monument was built at Chickamauga, the captured flags of the Confederacy returned, and the name of Jefferson Davis restored to its place on Cabin John's Bridge in the District of Columbia by order of Mr. Roosevelt just before retiring from the office of President.

If we have been misunderstood in the past, by our efforts for the betterment of all mankind we will be understood in the future. If we have been humiliated in the past, we will be honored in the future in exact proportion as we develop the magnificent resources of the South and settle aright her questions of grave responsibility. If our manhood of the past was doubted every soldier's



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grave in the nation is a silent and pathetic witness of bravery. If the Sons of the Confederate soldier be questioned, witness their going to other sections of the nation and taking a place in the arts, sciences, commerce and literature. If the womanhood of the Nation be threatened by the invasion of modern industry and other seducing ills from wifehood and motherhood, I believe the nation's hope for the motherhood of the future will not be more secure than in the happy wives and daughters of the South.

I will not weary you with gratulation but it is well to take hope from the past, that we may see in dangers to be corrected opportunity for manhood, to see in undeveloped resources opportunity for a high minded commerce and business, to see in boys and girls opportunity for education and religion.

The pleasure of meeting with you on this anniversary of Mr. Davis will not be full if I do not leave with you the sentiment that the nation's hope is in the middle class where is usually found the gold of character. I will be glad if from anything I have said one boy or girl should come to sing with Frank L. Stanton that

Back of the gloom—

The bloom!

Back of the strife—

Sweet life,

And flowering meadows that glow and gleam
Where the winds sing joy and daisies dream,
And the sunbeams color the quickening clod,
And faith in the future and trust in God.

Back of the gloom—

The bloom!

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